

**CUSTOMER SATISFACTION
CAN HELP TO INSURE THE
SURVIVAL OF FIRE BASED EMS**

**ADVANCED LEADERSHIP ISSUES
IN
EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES**

BY: Richard A. Cheverie
Assistant Fire Chief
Bangor Fire Department
Bangor, Maine

An applied research project submitted to the National Fire Academy
as part of the Executive Fire Officer Program

November 1998

ABSTRACT

Private ambulance providers have increased their pressure to take over medical transport in many communities, including Bangor, Maine. With the pressure of privatization, organizations are faced with satisfying the changing needs and expectations of their customers. This requires the comparison of services provided to those services wanted. Services desired by the customer must be analyzed, to determine the availability of resources to provide those services. The problem this created for the Bangor Fire department was that no database existed from which to draw this information.

The purpose of this research project was to determine if the Bangor Fire Department would benefit from developing and instituting a customer service program. A descriptive research methodology was utilized to answer the following research questions:

1. What methods are used by fire and EMS services to evaluate and obtain customer feedback?
2. What is the anticipated cost of instituting a customer service program?
3. What is the minimum level of service that the customer expects from the fire department?
4. What programs are currently available that promote customer satisfaction that may be beneficial for the Bangor Fire department?

The research included a review of published literature, an Internet search for related articles, and a random EMS customer service survey.

Several results from the research suggested that the customers of the Bangor Fire Department

are currently satisfied with the services they receive. Results of the survey indicated the customer's highest priorities are quick response and technically competent personnel that respond to their emergencies.

Based on the research conducted, it was recommended that fire departments become aware of the benefits of a customer service program. That programs begin with one aspect of service and expand to include the other services offered by the organization. It was also recommended that a joint labor and management committee be involved in developing a strategic customer service program for the implementation process.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	2
Table of Contents	4
Introduction	5
Background and Significance	6
Literature Review	9
Procedures	16
Results	18
Discussion	22
Recommendations	24
References	26
Appendix A: Organizational Chart	28
Appendix B: Survey Card of Customer Service	31
Appendix C: Follow-up Telephone Interview Sheet	33
Appendix D: September/October Summary of Customer Service	36

INTRODUCTION

One hallmark of the fire service has always been a strong sense of heritage, continuity, and commitment. Firefighters have been a highly visible part of their communities, receiving praise and support from their citizens as they perform duties no other group could. Traditionally, the fire service provides a force to eliminate damage by extinguishing fires. That limited scope of operations has been expanded through the years to include emergency medical calls, hazardous material response, technical rescue calls, and about any other “emergency” a citizen may experience or request the fire department’s assistance. The firefighters in Bangor, Maine are no different.

The needs and expectations of the citizens in the communities we serve are changing. This requires the fire service to constantly compare the list of services provided, to those services desired. This list of services desired by the customer must be analyzed, to determine the availability of resources to provide the desired level of services. The problem this created for the Bangor Fire Department was that no database existed from which to draw.

The purpose of this research project was to determine if the Bangor Fire Department would benefit from developing and instituting a customer service program. A descriptive research methodology was utilized to answer the following research questions:

1. What methods are used by fire and EMS services to evaluate and obtain customer feedback?
2. What is the anticipated cost of instituting a customer service program?
3. What is the minimum level of service that the customer expects from the fire

department?

4. What programs are currently available that promote customer satisfaction that may be beneficial for the Bangor Fire department?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Bangor Fire department has a long tradition of dedicated service to the community dating back to 1814, when the residents raised fifty dollars for their first fire station. In the mid 1960's the Bangor Fire Department (See the organizational chart, Appendix A) began providing Emergency Medical services (EMS) to the community. In those early days Bangor Fire not only treated and transported all emergency patients in the city, but was the sole provider of all inter-facility and non emergency transport services as well. Bangor Fire Department remained a full service provider running three ambulances until 1978. Then, they dropped to a single ambulance and turned over all inter-facility transports to Medic Ambulance, a local for-profit ambulance company, and concentrated their efforts in emergency prehospital care and transport.

In 1989 a second private ambulance company, Capital Ambulance, appeared in the City of Bangor. Within a couple of years they were the only private ambulance service remaining within the community. The change in private ambulance providers did not result in any perceived changes in the arrangements or services from the viewpoint of the Bangor Fire Department.

Capital Ambulance simply assumed all the inter-facility and non emergency transport business that the two companies had previously competitively shared.

Bangor Fire Department's arrangement to provide only an emergency care and transport

service continued in effect until the State of Maine introduced its ambitious managed health care plan in June of 1996. The state's plan encouraged all the full service providers of prehospital care and transport to enter a contractual agreement for reimbursement with the managed care insurance companies.

In recent years, the Bangor Fire Department had undertaken several steps to insure improvements in their delivery of EMS. Service had improved from providing a basic life support (BLS) service to providing an advanced life support (ALS) program with paramedics on each rescue/ambulance. Then as the quality of the EMS services increased, so did the quantity of EMS calls. This resulted in an expansion from one to three rescue units in less than two years. This expansion has allowed the strategic placement of a rescue unit at each of the three fire stations, which has reduced the citywide response times.

Maine's EMS providers have discovered the profound impact that managed care can have upon the unprepared provider of prehospital care and medical transport. Under the state's managed care plan, the contracted provider negotiates a per capita rate to be paid periodically for the delivery of prehospital services. The contracted ambulance service no longer charges for each transport but is paid a stipulated dollar amount determined by the insurance company to cover the cost of providing care to their clients. The state's request for proposal (RFP) encouraged the insurers to obtain contracts with the full service providers of both prehospital care and transport, which in effect could preclude many public fire service organizations from involvement in the process. In response to the state's plan, the Bangor Fire Department added a fourth rescue and expanded their services to include both inter-facility and non emergency transport.

While the administrators of the Bangor Fire Department were working through the inevitable changes that this expanded role required, the local private for profit ambulance company submitted a proposal directly to the city manager and city council. Capital Ambulance Service wanted to take over all patient transports within the greater Bangor area. They suggested that the fire department continue to provide an emergency first response EMS service by responding with their ALS engine companies. Under their plan, Bangor Fire would assess the patient initiating care and upon Capital's arrival turn the patient over to them for additional care and transport. This aggressive strategy that the private ambulance company proposed would have jeopardized Bangor's EMS division. This could have translated into the elimination of 16 positions and three rescues units.

With the support of the city council, Bangor Fire rejected Capital's proposal, and the number of EMS calls for Bangor's services grew dramatically. This negatively affected Capital Ambulance and in May of 1998, Eastern Maine Medical Center (EMMC) purchased Capital with the intent of resurrecting Capital's previous proposal of assuming all medical transports within the region. The Bangor Fire Department's EMS division was again threatened.

Over the years, the residents have continued their support of the fire department by providing the department the tools, equipment, and facilities that the firefighters need to continue their efforts to save lives and protect property. This support had allowed the department to expand their services in a continual effort of exceeding their community's assumed expectations. The department was now embroiled in a volatile controversy, which required the administrators to develop a method that would identify their customers and evaluate their perceptions of Bangor Fire Department's EMS services.

This research project addressed the issue of determining the appropriate steps to an effective

customer service strategy, an issue analyzed in the Advanced Leadership Issues in Emergency Medical Services course (module 3), at the National Fire Academy. Faced with the perceived impact that EMMC's proposal would bring, the Bangor Fire Department needed to develop a method to determine customer satisfaction. This paradigm shift would require the development of a strategy that would solicit their customer's responses regarding their services. It is anticipated that the resolution strategy developed for the Bangor Fire Department's administrators could be generalized for application in other departments faced with the issue of customer satisfaction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The data reviewed for this project involved the examination of literature pertaining to the issue of customer service from three general subject areas. First, literature on customer service was reviewed as it pertains to the external customer. This body of articles was examined to obtain insight into the influence it has on EMS providers. Second, literature on customer satisfaction was reviewed to determine the potential impact it has on an organization. Finally, fire service and emergency medical service literature was reviewed to determine what other jurisdictions had experienced in implementing a customer service program. This material was examined to seek guidance from the successes and failures of other fire-based EMS organizations.

The Influence of Customer Service

In an article taken off the Internet, John T. Self (December 1997) provided a review on some customer service facts.

The average business never hears from 96% of its unhappy customers. For every complaint

received, the company in fact has 26 customers with problems, 6 of which are serious in nature. Of customers who register a complaint, between 54% and 70% will do business again with the organization if their complaint is resolved. That figure goes up to an impressive 95% if the customer feels that the complaint was resolved quickly (pp. 1-2).

A hallmark of the fire service is a positive attitude among its members toward the delivery of service (Holt, 1997). However, all too often the fire department is taken for granted (Bruno, 1998). Hal Bruno (1998) suggested that fire service administrators open their eyes:

At a time when gaining taxpayer support is essential for fire departments, customer service is a way to break through the public apathy that surrounds most departments. Public opinion polls show that firefighters and EMS personnel are highly respected, but the public is indifferent when it comes to understanding or caring about the problems facing the fire-rescue services (p. 10).

Service is one of those terms where it behooves the leadership to question if their organization is meeting current public expectations (Thorp, May 1997). Ultimately, to define customer service one must first know what it is that the customer of your community, or protection district, want and need! (Bramlette, 1997). The fire department can acquire valuable information through conducting stakeholder research. This research can be designed to solicit information regarding both stakeholder expectations and satisfaction (Fleming, 1997).

Fire departments are business and we as fire department leaders, must become knowledgeable in what our customers expect of the fire department (Fleming, 1997). Customer loyalty develops as customers feel a connection with a company (Self, November 1997). By improving every aspect of

how we do business, including the way we communicate and how we present ourselves on the street — not just how we actually perform our jobs — can achieve high levels of customer satisfaction (Bernier, 1997). After all, most service companies have the same “stuff,” it’s the service that causes company differentiation (Self, November 1997).

John T. Self (October 1998) explained the concept of service in this manner:

They don’t call us the service industry for no reason. We don’t manufacture anything except service and relationships. Service companies must be in the business of continuously training its employees to provide that elusive standard of the product called service (p. 1).

Customer service may be defined as giving the customer anything they want, anytime they want it and being nice about it (Bramblette, 1997). Customer service, whether good or bad exists whenever there is customer contact or a “moment of truth” (Self, November 1997). Organizations need to remember, every single contact that a citizen has with a local government service provides an opportunity to win a supporter or create an adversary (Halas, 1996). Our future will either be created by us or created for us (Smith, 1998).

The Impact of Customer Service

Those who believe that customer service is only important in the private sector have not yet accepted the reality that the private sector is actually taking over emergency service response in many communities, in part because of the very attitude (Templeton, 1996). I believe if we expect to survive in the volatile economic and political times, we had better be striving to deliver a pro-active, high quality level of service, which is largely based on the perceived needs of our local community (Halas, 1996).

The point is, what the taxpayer thinks about the fire department is important (Burkart, 1997). The only way you can deal with a tight-fisted city administration is to have the support of voters who care as much about fire protection as they do about the schools, transportation and police (Bruno, 1998).

Whenever there is competition, keeping the customer satisfied is a must (Bernier, 1997). The customer's level of expectation must be satisfied or the experience will be a negative one (Self, May 1998). When people have a choice, treat them well or they will choose someone else (Bernier, 1997). Remember that not only is the customer always right, but that the customer always pays the freight for your operation (Carter, 1996).

Fred Thorp (July 1997) stated that the fire service must understand that tenacious government administrators are actively seeking to shift public services to commercial interest:

Anytime a bureaucrat can shift expenses off the taxpayer, no matter what the service, there is little hesitation. The Fire service must be visionary and dynamic in developing a comprehensive list of services to be offered to the community and that list must remain dynamic and growing as new opportunities develop (pp. 4-5).

According to David Scott (1996), fire-based EMS providers should maintain a constant vigil to retain their EMS services:

The value of EMS to the continuation of the fire service can't be understated. But EMS is neither a panacea nor a sure thing. Many fire departments have fought or are fighting pitched battles with private firms that also want the revenue-generating transport business and they may

have more political clout (p. 40).

The authors of a collaborative article, Chief Harry Diezel and Cathy Anderson (1996), asked some rather pointed questions:

What happens when your satisfied customers don't rally to support the fire department at the political level when you need them? Worse yet, what happens when your customers are faced with a choice between department needs and a youth recreational needs? (p. 72).

In times of future budget constraints, it would be nice to have a group of citizens stand up and say, "Leave these guys alone. They're too valuable to cut." (Diezel, 1996).

The Implementation of Customer Service

Public image is built on what the fire service produces in quality service. How and with what kind of attitude that service is provided, is key (Burkart, 1997). If we are genuinely concerned, all we need do is talk with the people we serve (Burkart, 1997). After all, the customer service approach can be the salvation of the fire-rescue service, which these days need all the public support it can muster (Bruno, 1998).

Good business practices include basic public relations planning and strategies (Smith, 1998). You don't have to conduct a comprehensive survey; just select one key service that you'd like to evaluate and improve (Templeton, 1996). The effective path of leaders and managers must include forming and promoting a vision and a mission which focuses on high quality customer services, delivered by well-trained personnel who treat the public with respect, patience, and courtesy (Halas, 1996).

The published results of a survey conducted in Orange County, Florida, indicated that many

factors influence the customer's attitude regarding the service received. Bruce McClendon (1996) summarized the results of this survey of customers who had dealt with government agencies:

The customers wanted quick service; knowledgeable employees with a courteous and respectful attitude; fair treatment; understandable rules and regulations with consistent interpretations; trusting, caring, and empathetic service; and employees who demonstrated ingenuity and creativeness in solving their problems (p. 20).

In an article that examined the customer service approach used by Phoenix Fire, Chief Alan Brunacini (1996) suggested building upon the strengths that are inherent to the fire service.

Our strength is, and always has been, our capability to quickly deliver teams of highly motivated workers who together do — organized, coordinated, skillful manual labor within a rapidly shrinking and dynamic window of opportunity. Being custom-centered means that we continue doing the physical stuff, while we add (both actually and symbolically) a new customer service manual in our system.

There are some that have voiced warnings that should be considered in the early development of a customer service strategy. Change is one verifiable event each of us can count on, along with resistance from within the organization (Thorp, November 1997). Fred Thorp pointed out that the fire service has its far share of whiners and winners:

Without any question, the fire service has more than its share of whiners. Whiners are losers, and whiners are also in the minority. Winners are firmly entrenched in the idea that quality service is the precursor to job security, stakeholder return and investment in the

community at large (p. 27).

This makes it imperative that the organization's administrators make sure the whole team knows that the goals of the surveys and customer service cards are to improve the team, not to start terminating people (Willett, 1997).

Commit to customer service (Self, November 1997). Any successful strategy that promotes the vision of "devotion to service" will require the support of management and employees (Champy, 1995). This principle of customer service requires the adopting company to: live it, breathe it, believe it, and reward it (Self, November 1997).

Customer service creates loyalty and will bring them back (Self, May 1998). John Self (May 1998) suggested a possible answer to the question, how do we begin this?

You do this by establishing measurable standards for your service personnel. Standards make for consistency for customers. That makes customers comfortable with your operation, and that paves the ground for repeat business (p. 2).

Every contact with members of your community should be used to promote a positive image. It takes a long time to build up a positive image but no time at all to tear it down when something negative happens (Eisner, 1997). Every patient should be given the opportunity to comment on our performance by mail or by telephone. Just being given the opportunity to respond can improve their perception of our service, and their suggestions might be quite valuable (Bernier, 1997). Customers who rate their care as average or below get a personal phone call. They should be interviewed for clues as to how the department could improve its service (Taigman, 1998).

In summary, the literature revealed that customer service is undeniably linked to customer satisfaction. Articles suggested that customer service programs can strengthen our standing with the public. Several articles suggested that the survival of an organization, may depend on its ability to adjust services to reflect the constantly changing needs of its customers. Only the organizations that have taken a pro active role in addressing the customer's needs can truly count on their continued support. These same articles expressed concern that without a customer service program in place, many organizations are insufficiently informed of their customer's perceptions. Most articles indicate that overlooking the customer's expectations may jeopardize the ability of the organization to provide emergency services into the future. Many authors are convinced that the impact of failing to meet customer expectations may open the door for others who seek to provide the same services.

In review of the articles dealing with fire service providers of EMS, many indicate that having a strategy to address customer service is critical. Clearly, most articles express concern that the best way to maintain positive customer service outcomes was by preventing negative outcomes from ever occurring. The articles suggested that the most effective programs for customer service are developed utilizing ideas from all levels within the organization. A consistent theme through all the articles was the need for a clear vision, which will provide a guide to action and a reference point from which success are measured.

PROCEDURES

A review of the literature on customer satisfaction, customer service, and related fire based EMS articles, comprised the first stage of the research procedure. The literature review was conducted

using a descriptive research methodology. Literature reviews were conducted using the research facilities at the University of Maine at Orono, Maine, the Bangor Public Library in Bangor, Maine, the Maine State Library in Augusta, Maine, and the Learning Resource Center at the National Emergency Training Center in Emmitsburg, Maryland. Request were also submitted to the International Association of Fire Chiefs and the International Association of Firefighters EMS division for articles that related to customer satisfaction. In addition, several journal articles and research papers were identified as having relevance to this paper. The Internet was searched for articles on improving customer service. Further, a search was conducted of recent articles (within the last four years) in issues of the fire service and emergency medical service trade journals pertaining to customer service.

The articles identified through the literature search were reviewed and analyzed. Those deemed pertinent were summarized for inclusion in the literature review section of this paper.

A quality assurance survey was randomly distributed to customers that had used Bangor Fire Department's EMS services. A survey card (See customer service survey card, Appendix B), was sent with the EMS statement to every customer that had an EMS run number that ended in either 5 or 0. In a two-month period a total of 180 surveys were distributed with 129 being returned. The results were tabulated by question and are listed in Appendix D.

Each customer that either included a negative comment or rated their care as average or below received a personal telephone call. The call was used to interview them (See follow-up telephone interview sheet, Appendix C) for suggestions on how the Bangor Fire Department could improve its service.

Limitations

This research project faced several limitations that affected the outcome. First, the Bangor Fire Department did not have any method in place to measure customer satisfaction. This shortfall required the administrators to institute the recommended program and to review it every eight weeks to modify the program as needed.

Since the fire service has a long tradition and established method of operation, change comes slowly. This was identified as the second limiting factor that had to be overcome. A joint labor and management “EMS committee” was utilized to address this issue.

The third limiting factor resulted from outside political pressure applied to members of the city council. Administrators from Capital Ambulance and their owners, EMMC, had united to present the idea that the Bangor Fire Department be restricted from advertising or marketing any of their services. With the city council agreeing to this idea, it restricted the customer service program. Customer service had to be presented as a tool of quality assurance and that limited the type of questions that could be asked and hampered funding.

Definition of terms

Advance Life support (ALS) Special services designed to provide definitive prehospital emergency medical care, including, but not limited to, cardiopulmonary resuscitation, cardiac monitoring, cardiac defibrillation, advanced airway management, intravenous therapy, administration of specific drugs and other medicinal preparations, and other specific techniques and procedures administered by authorized personnel.

Basic Life Support (BLS) Emergency lifesaving non-invasive procedures performed by trained

personnel to stabilize patients who have experienced sudden illness or injury.

Customer Service Any contact, whether active or passive, between a customer and a company, that causes a negative or positive perception by a customer. The perception will be influenced to be either positive or negative by the customer's expectations of the contact having been met, exceeded, or disappointed.

Emergency medical Services (EMS) A public safety entity charged with delivering a public health service or a combination of emergency medical care and emergency medical transportation, provided outside the hospital.

Request for Proposal (RFP) A concise document outlining the requirements of the local government and allowing the respondents to propose a system that would meet these requirements, with cost being one factor among many.

Work-fair Laborer Individuals who are required to work for the subsidized benefits (food stamps, health care, job training, and housing allotments) they receive from the community.

RESULTS

At the onset of this research project, four specific research questions were identified. The results of the research are organized around those four questions and presented in order:

1. What methods are used by fire and EMS services to evaluate and obtain customer feedback?

The literature suggested that the use of customer service cards and customer service surveys are

widely used by both fire and EMS organizations. A consideration presented regarding direct mailings was that returns are often low and the cost becomes a greater factor. Direct contacts either in person or by telephone have also been used in some organizations, however, this requires a substantial commitment of labor resources. Most successful customer service programs do not require an organization to conduct an in-depth comprehensive survey of their entire operations. It was suggested in the literature review that an organization select one aspect of its service to evaluate and improve.

2. What is the anticipated cost of instituting a customer service program?

In answering this question, the research established that there were several factors that could influence the anticipated cost of a customer service program. The identified factors included, the type of program, the scope and magnitude of the program, and the actual cost of administering the program. There was also the issue regarding the city council's new policy that prohibited the Bangor fire Department from any advertising or marketing of our EMS services.

The Bangor Fire Department's annual budget is funded through the city's tax base. Since the department had not initially budgeted for a new customer service program, the startup cost was needed from the general fund. However, with the city council's policy it was decided that an alternative source of funding would be advisable. The joint labor and management 'EMS Committee' decided that sharing both the cost and the results of the survey between the labor union and then city was a viable option. This cut the cost of the program in half.

To establish the anticipated cost of the customer service program each of the identified factors needed to be considered. The first item to be considered was the type of customer service

program. It was decided that the program would take a random customer service survey of those who had used the Bangor Fire Department's EMS service. This would require cards to be printed, distributed, and collected. With the card being included with the EMS statement, there was no direct cost of distribution other than the labor of adding the card to the statement's envelope. Since the Bangor Fire Department used 'work-fair labor' to stuff envelopes, the labor cost became a non-issue.

The second consideration was the scope and magnitude of the program. Bangor Fire Department averages 457 EMS calls per month. It was decided that a 20% random customer service survey be taken of all EMS customers. Based on a minimum order of 2,500 cards, the cost per card including postage was determined to be \$.45.

Since the EMS committee volunteered to review the survey cards received and generate a bi-monthly report, (See September/October summary of customer service, Appendix D) for both labor and management to review, there was no direct cost incurred in obtaining the desired data.

The anticipated cost of instituting the customer service program was determined to be \$1,125.00. With the organized labor union and city sharing the cost, the actual impact was \$562.50. This translated into less than 0.0001% of the annual fire department budget.

3. What is the minimum level of service that the customer expects from the fire department?

The literature review suggested that most customers want quick service rendered by knowledgeable employees. The results of the random survey (Appendix D) supported this concept. Those EMS customers that responded to the survey indicated that they expect an EMS service to

provide a quick response with a technically competent crew. This was evidenced by the fact that nearly 98% of the survey respondents indicated that these two issues were expectations they had for the Bangor Fire Department's EMS service.

In the random survey, 52% indicated that a prompt response was their first concern and technical competence was their second concern. The first group of customers was united with a second group consisting of 46% which indicated that technical competence was their primary concern followed by a quick response.

4. What programs are currently available that promote customer satisfaction that may be beneficial for the Bangor Fire Department?

Alan Brunacini (1996) presented the following concepts of customer service that may provide the ideas to answer this question:

- Our essential mission and number one priority is to deliver the best possible service to our customer.
- Always be nice - treat everyone with respect, kindness, patience, and consideration.
- Always attempt to execute a standard problem solving outcome: quick, effective, skillful, safe caring, managed.
- Regard everyone as a customer.
- Consider how and what you are doing looks to others.
- Don't disqualify the customer with your qualifications.
- Basic organization behavior must become customer-centered.

- We must continually improve our customer service performance. (p. iv).

These principles can be studied and implemented into the Bangor Fire Department's customer service plan. Leadership and management classes are readably available through the local colleges, universities, and the National Fire Academy. A vision of customer satisfaction, with the unified support of the joint labor and management 'EMS Committee,' will become a shared vision. The department's in-service education program can be used to provide training in the general concepts of customer service and to build an organizational vision.

DISCUSSION

The literature review established that customer service has been and will remain a vital component of the fire service operation. The only question that remains to be answered was just how involved will each fire-based provider become? For the Bangor Fire Department, the answer was fairly easy. Survival of the current EMS system and the positions connected with it demands our attention to satisfying the customer through a customer service program. Many communities have a substantial investment in their local fire department for apparatus, equipment, personnel, and training. When an emergency does occur, the citizens call 911 with the anticipation that the fire department will quickly respond and professionally handle the emergency at hand. They expect and deserve quality customer service from their sizable investment.

This researcher's observations concur with the documents reviewed that most fire department administrators often overlook the possibility of a customer service program. Often the motivating factor

to improve customer service results from a series of complaints. The primary cause for concern appears to be the lack of understanding and shared vision of the possible benefits a structured customer service program will mean to an organization.

It became apparent from the research process that the Bangor Fire Department would need to institute a customer service program. Department administrators believed through a structured customer service program the organization would achieve a greater level of support from their satisfied taxpayers.

While the issue of Capital Ambulances's proposal was a great concern to the Bangor Fire Department, so is the threat posed by adding the political weight of EMMC, the largest employer in the county, to that proposal. The fire service is internally competitive by nature. Promotions, assignments, and hiring practices are normally conducted through competitive means. The threat posed by the private service to eliminate Bangor Fires's current role in the local EMS arena provided a new front. In answering this challenge the executive fire administrators looked at the principle of competition:

Competition is essential for improving almost everything we do. It fuels the drive to attain higher achievement . . . a patient care system without some inherent form of competition will eventually become sloppy and careless . . . competition results in better patient care. The competition between services, and between public and private sectors, will ultimately stimulate improvements on all sides (Page, 1994, pp. 7-8).

The Bangor Fire department took the position that including a structured customer service program is being responsive to the customer's needs and will improve their position to respond to the private service's proposal. By insuring customer satisfaction, Bangor Fire is not only upgrading to offer

a superior service but also attempting to maintain the EMS revenue stream. This revenue is used to lessen the burden of the department upon the taxpaying community.

This researcher discovered, as a result of this research, that the clear vision is one unobstructed by preconceived ideas and being well informed of the full range of possibilities an issue presents. In dealing with the issue of customer service the plan must not be cast in stone but must remain flexible and allow for a contingent plan to be implemented at a moment's notice. Although there has been broad-based support for the new customer service program, few evidently fully understand the implications and are willing to commit their full energies into the program. Furthermore, as the program develops and problems are identified, fine tuning will be required to both the attitudes in conflict and the overall strategic plan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study supports fire-based customer service programs as a means to secure the future of the fire service. This researcher agrees with these facts and recommends the following steps to meet these objectives:

Organizations should appreciate that with change comes both conflict and resistance from within. Managers should plan to secure broad-based support from the administrative team and the labor force as early as possible. Open communications, necessary training, and educational development require the support of all key players prior to the implementation of any customer service program. The time and energy devoted to gaining employee input regarding a customer service program is time well

spent, and will result in a shared vision of ownership in the program.

Encourage other fire service organizations to look at their customer service. Look for opportunities to support your service and its mission by enhancing your value to the community through insuring customer satisfaction with your service. The successes of similar fire-based customer service programs should motivate organizations to adopt their own program, before they are pushed into action from a threat or public outcry of dissatisfaction.

The Bangor Fire Department should continue to review the data from the customer service survey cards and adjust its service delivery as necessary. Develop a data base that can be utilized to illustrate the actual statistics of providing true customer service. Read the EMS and Fire Service journals to remain current on changing trends and adjust services to meet the needs of the customers. Train all personnel to understand how the specific system utilized by the department will work and prepare the service too integrate with it. Periodically evaluate and modify the system through fine tuning, until it is an inseparable part of the organization's culture. Expand the program to include the other services offered by the organization.

In conclusion, fire service leaders need to be visionaries. They need to apply creative management techniques to the fire department by exploring any new idea or in scrutinizing concepts proven in the business world for possible adoption into their organization. The key to success of the fire service organization will be discovered through taking a pro-active approach designed to mainstream the department. Customer service may be the first concept that should be considered by many organizations. No administrator should sit back and wait until they are forced to act. They should, however, research new ideas and concepts that will enable them to ensure the future of their fire service organization by satisfying their customer's needs.

REFERENCES

- Bernier, E.; (1997, November). Customer satisfaction — Putting the patient first. Emergency. p. 19.
- Bruno, H.; (1998, January). The Phoenix approach to customer service. Firehouse. p. 10.
- Burkart, G.; (1997, May). Engine 21 — Customer service — Quality service!. Responder. pp. 13-26.
- Brunacini, A. V.; (1996). Essentials of fire department customer service. Stillwater, OK: Fire Protection Publications.
- Brunacini, A.V.; (1996, August). The gospel according to Phoenix. Fire Chief. pp. 52-56.
- Bramblette, D. M.; (1997, May). Defining customer service. Responder. p. 5.
- Carter, H. R.; (1996, January). Service — The key to success in the turbulent years ahead. The Voice. pp. 51-52.
- Champy, J.; (1995). Re-engineering management: The mandate for new leadership. New York, NY: Harper Business.
- Diezel, H. and Anderson, C.; (1996, August). Start a trend toward untraditional service. Fire Chief. pp. 72-76.
- Eisner, H.; (1997, December). Promoting ourselves and our mission each and every day. Firehouse. p. 7.
- Fleming, R.; (1997, March). Who are your stakeholders?. Responder. pp. 7-31.
- Halas, J.; (1996, January). Does the customer always come first?. The Voice. p. 49.
- Holt, F. X.; (1997, August). Customer service: A new concept in the fire service. Fire Engineering. pp.84.
- McClendon, R.; (1996, May). Customer service for regulators. Public Management. pp. 19-21.
- Page, J.; (1994, November). What really is best for the patient. Jems. pp. 7-8.

- Scott, D.; (1996, July/August). New directions in service delivery. NFPA Journal. pp. 38-41.
- Self, J. T.; (1997, November). Why customer service is important to you (and me). The Sideroad. [On-Line]. Available: <http://www.sideroad.com/cs/column3.html>
- Self, J. T.; (1997, December). Customer service facts and figures. The Sideroad. [On-Line]. Available: <http://www.sideroad.com/cs/column7.html>
- Self, J. T.; (1998, May). Standards of service. The Sideroad. [On-Line]. Available: <http://www.sideroad.com/cs/column26.html>
- Self, J. T.; (1998, October). R.O.I.=Return on investment. The Sideroad. [On-Line]. Available: <http://www.sideroad.com/cs/column47.html>
- Smith, J.; (1998, March). Checking it twice. Ambulance Industry Journal. pp. 20-23.
- Taigman, M.; (1998, July). Sterling Sarasota. Jems. pp. 44-54.
- Templeton, R.; (1996, August). Customer service: Staying the course. Fire Chief. pp. 58-67.
- Thorp, F.; (1997, May). What is this thing — service?. Responder. pp. 7-27.
- Thorp, F.; (1997, November). Whiners vs winners. Responder. pp. 8-27.
- Willett, K.; (1997, May/June). How to maintain a customer service attitude in your communication center. 9-1-1 Magazine. pp. 38-43.

APPENDIX A

Bangor Fire Department

1998 Organizational Chart

Fire Chief

Asst. Chief
A-Crew
Communications

Asst. Chief
B-Crew
Vehicles

Asst. Chief
C-Crew
EMS

Asst. Chief
D-Crew
Prevention/Ed.

Captain
Central Station

Captain
Central Station

Captain
Station Six

Captain
Central Station

Captain
Central Station

Captain
Station Five

Lt.
Station 5
Rescue 5
FF Paramedic
FF EMT
Engine 5
FF EMT-1
FF EMT
Rescue 1
FF Paramedic
FF EMT

Lt.
Central
Engine 1
FF Paramedic
FF
Ladder 1
FF
Rescue 1
FF Paramedic
FF EMT

Lt.
Station 5
Rescue 5
FF Paramedic
FF EMT
Engine 5
FF EMT-1
FF EMT
Ladder 1
FF
Rescue 1
FF Paramedic
FF EMT

Lt.
Central
Engine 1
FF Paramedic
FF
Ladder 1
FF
Rescue 1
FF Paramedic
FF EMT

Rescue 5
FF Paramedic
FF EMT
Engine 5
FF EMT-1
FF EMT

APPENDIX B

Bangor Fire Department's Survey Card

The **CITY OF BANGOR'S FIRE/RESCUE DEPARTMENT** wants to provide the public with the best service possible. In an effort to help us improve, please take a moment to rate our recent response or assistance to your call for service. Please circle the appropriate response and write a #1 next to the question that indicates your greatest expectation of our service and a #2 next to your second expectation.

How would you rank the courteousness of the 911 Fire Department Operator and the other employees which you had contact?

Excellent Good Needs Improvement

2. How would you rank the courteousness of our employees?

Excellent Good Needs Improvement

3. How would you rank the technical competence of our crew?

Excellent Good Needs Improvement

4. Did the Fire/Rescue Unit arrive in a reasonable time?

Yes No

5. How would you rate the cleanliness of our rescue ambulance?

Excellent Good Needs Improvement N/A

6. Please rate your overall satisfaction with the City of Bangor's Fire/Rescue Department.

Excellent Good Needs Improvement

COMMENTS: _____

Name & Phone # Optional: _____

APPENDIX C

FOLLOW-UP TELEPHONE INTERVIEW SHEET

Suggestions to the interviewer: Always make sure that you have the survey card, copy of the run report, and the interview sheet ready prior to placing the call. Always be nice! If it is not a convenient time for them . . . try to establish a better time to call and apologize for the intrusion. If they ask a question that you are unsure of, tell you are not certain, but that you will find out and call them back (be certain to get back to them within 24 hours). **REMEMBER** you are representing the department be professional about it.

Hello, my name is _____ from the Bangor Fire Department. Our department's continuing goal is to provide the public with the best ambulance/rescue service possible. I would like too thank-you for taking the time to respond and return the blue survey card that was recently sent to you. If it is a convenient time, I would like to ask you a few follow-up questions that will allow us to continue to improve our service through our quality assurance program.

Your response card was forwarded to me for follow-up since you indicated (that _____ needs improvement)
(in your comments a concern that should be addressed).

NEEDS IMPROVEMENT SECTION

On your response card, you indicated (read the actual question from the card) needs improvement. Since we take these responses seriously and the card does not provide adequate space for your additional comments, I would like to ask you to share any suggestions you might have.

COMMENT SECTION

On the response card that you returned you indicated
(read the actual comment made). I want to thank you for
bringing this to our attention and want to insure you that:

_____ I will be looking into this and will get back to
you with some answers (try to call back within
24 hours unless more time is necessary and if
that is the case set a time to call back with
some information).

_____ Maine EMS protocols require us to transport any
serious medically unstable patient to the
closest medical facility. To have bypassed

would have been a violation of state protocols
and good patient care.

_____ To explain the treatment rendered I have asked
_____ **(have the paramedic
or the medical director on the speaker phone for
this type of comment)** to explain the treatment
and care that was rendered.

_____ I want to thank you for your comment and want
you to know that

Again I want to thank you for bringing (this/these)
(issue/issues) to our attention and want to assure you that

the Bangor Fire Department is committed to improving it's service to the community. I appreciate your allowing me to take some of your time in trying to resolve these concerns by improving our service to better meet your needs. Please do not hesitate to call on the Bangor Fire Department's ambulance/rescue service should a need arise.

APPENDIX D

SUMMARY OF CUSTOMER SERVICE CARD SURVEY (September/October)

The Bangor Fire Department averages 457 EMS calls per month. It was decided that a 20% random sampling of customers that had used the department's EMS services would be conducted. This survey was undertaken to establish a data baseline to determine the level of customer satisfaction with the ambulance/rescue division.

This survey was distributed with the EMS statement to every EMS run number that ended with either a 5 or 0. In a two month (September/ October) period a total of 180 surveys were distributed with 129 or 72% being returned.

The survey asked the participant to rate Bangor's recent response or assistance to their call for service. Each participant was asked to circle the most appropriate response to 6 specific questions and to write a number 1 and a number 2 beside the two questions that indicated their greatest expectations regarding Bangor Fire Department's service. Each question gave the respondents choices to choose from. Most questions were rated as; excellent, good, or needs improvement. Results, which were tabulated by question and listed in a percentage format are presented herein:

1. How would you rank the courteousness of the 911 Fire Department Operator and the other employees which you had contact?

Out of 129 cards received 124 or 97% of the respondents answered this question.

	<u>Excellent</u>	<u>Good</u>	<u>Needs Improvement</u>
RESPONSE	(119)	(5)	(0)
PERCENT	96%	4%	

Graft #1

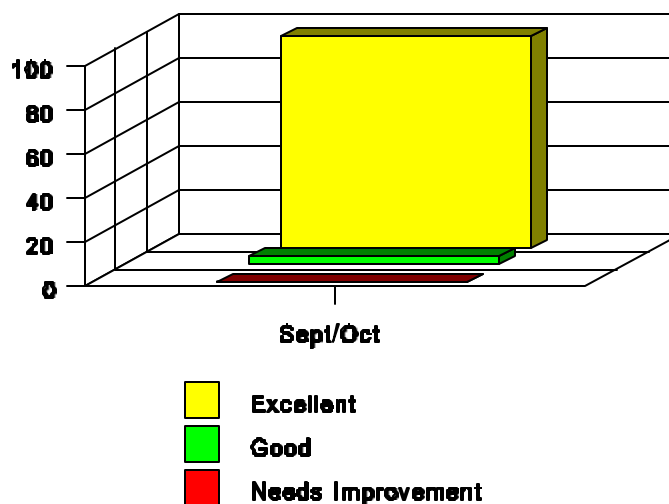
Graft #1 illustrates that 96% of the respondents ranked the courteousness of the 911 Fire Department operator as excellent. The remaining 4% of the respondents rated them as good. This would indicate a high level of customer satisfaction with this aspect of customer service.

2. How would you rank the courteousness of our employees?

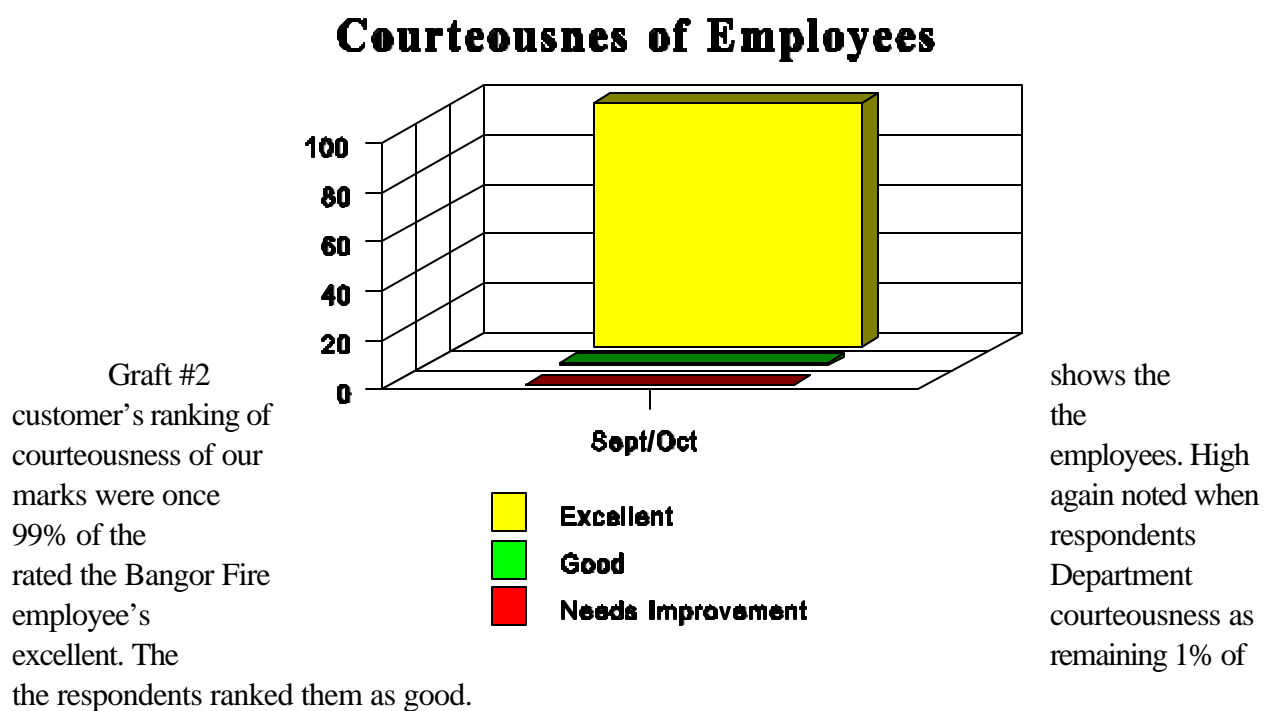
Out of 129 cards received 118 or 92% of the respondents answered this question.

	<u>Excellent</u>	<u>Good</u>	<u>Needs Improvement</u>
RESPONSE	(116)	(2)	(0)
PERCENT	99%	1%	

911 Courteousness



Graft #2



3. How would you rank the technical competence of our crew?

Out of 129 cards received 124 or 97% of the respondents answered this question.

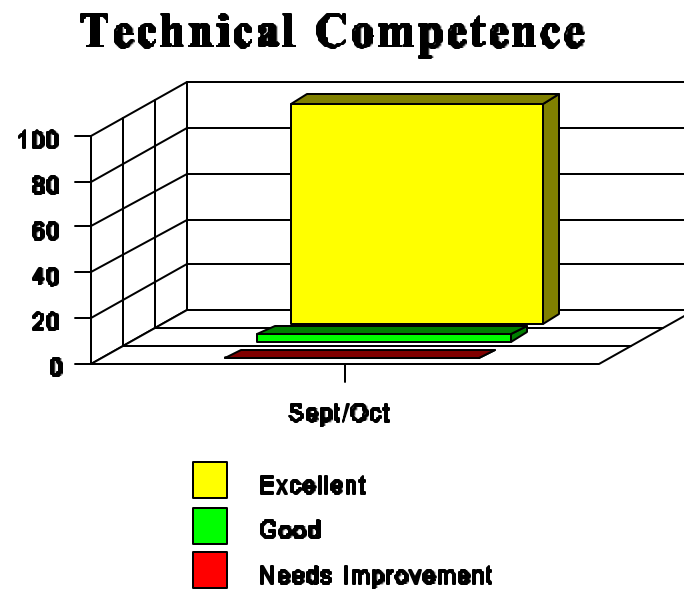
Excellent

Good

Needs Improvement

RESPONSE	(120)	(4)	(0)
PERCENT	97%	3%	

Graft # 3



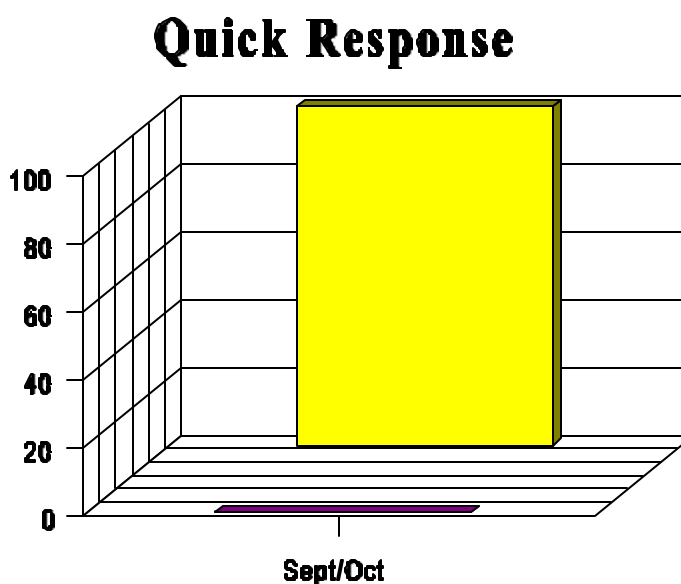
In graft #3, 97% of the respondents ranked the technical competence of the EMS ambulance/rescue crew as excellent. The remaining 3% of the respondents ranked them as good. This was also the issue selected by 46% of the respondents that indicated that technical competence was their primary concern followed by a quick response.

4. Did the Fire/Rescue unit arrive in a reasonable time?

Out of 129 cards received 129 respondents answered this question, this question received a 100% response.

	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
RESPONSE	(129)	(0)
PERCENT	100%	

Graft #4



Graft #4 illustrates that 100% of the respondents felt that the ambulance/rescue units arrived in a reasonable time. In the random survey, 52% indicated that a prompt response was their first concern and that technical competence was their second concern. The importance of this issue to the customers was reinforced when it was noted that this was the only question to be answered by 100% of the respondents.

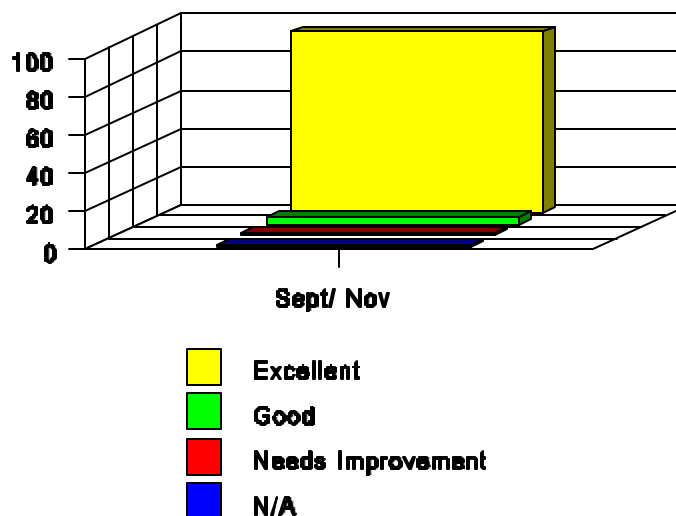
5. How would you rate the cleanliness of our rescue ambulance?

Out of 129 cards received 124 or 97% of the respondents answered this question.

	<u>Excellent</u>	<u>Good</u>	<u>Needs Improvement</u>	<u>N/A</u>
RESPONSE	(117)	(5)	(1)	(1)
PERCENT	95%	4%	>1%	>1%

Graft #5

Cleanliness of Rescue



Graft #5 illustrates the customer's satisfaction regarding the cleanliness of the ambulance/rescue units. The results of the question was broken down to show that 95% of the respondents considered the units excellent, 4% rated them good, and >1% rated the units as needing improvement.

6. Please rate your overall satisfaction with the City of Bangor's Fire/Rescue Department.

Out of 129 cards received 127 or 99% of the respondents answered this question.

	<u>Excellent</u>	<u>Good</u>	<u>Needs Improvement</u>
RESPONSE	(125)	(1)	(1)
PERCENT	99%	>1%	>1%

Graft #6



Graft #6 illustrates an overall 99% customer satisfaction with the EMS services offered by the Bangor Fire Department. Since the favorable responses were very high for all 6 questions it would indicate a high level of customer satisfaction.

Each customer that included a negative comment or rated their care as “needs improvement” received a personal phone call. The call was used to conduct a follow-up interview, (See the follow-up telephone interview sheet, Appendix C) to obtain their suggestions on how the Bangor Fire Department could improve services to meet their needs and expectations better.

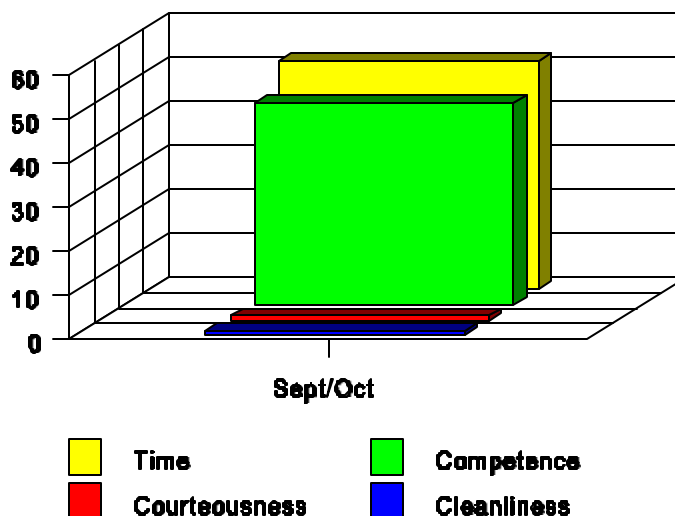
There were two response cards marked with “needs improvement.” These customers were personally contacted by the EMS chief for a follow-up interview. The contacted respondent of question #5 thought that the rescue floor was rather dirty. In checking with the crew for specifics regarding this call it was discovered that this EMS call involved an automobile accident where the vehicle went over an embankment. The weather was heavy rains and the crew entered the rescue’s patient compartment several times for supplies prior to loading the customer. This resulted in the floor being tracked with mud. When the customer had this information he quickly recanted his previous response and said “under the conditions of the weather and muddy bank, perhaps I was a bit hasty in my response.” The contacted respondent of question #6 though the charge for ALS transport of his wife was excessive. With a personnel telephone call and a brief explanation of the department’s charge structure this customer was appeased.

There were no negative comments noted on the customer service survey cards received. One woman questioned why a Bangor ambulance/rescue unit was called while she was being transported by Hermon Ambulance. The EMS chief contacted this woman and explained the Maine ALS backup protocols to her. She was satisfied that it was a standard procedure that was required by Maine EMS.

Another issue addressed on this customer service survey was to solicit the two greatest expectations the customer has regarding the Bangor Fire Department's ambulance/rescue service. Since only 69% (89 out of the 129 customer service survey cards received) contained a response to this request, this question as written may be unclear and should be revised in the next series of customer service survey cards.

Customer Expectations

Graft #7



Graft #7 illustrates the data collected from the respondents of the customer service survey cards indicating the customers highest expectations. Most of the EMS customers that responded to the survey indicated that they expect an EMS service that provides a quick response with a technically competent crew. This was evidenced by the fact that nearly 98% of the survey respondents indicated that these two issues were either their first or second expectation they had for the Bangor Fire Department's EMS service.

In the random survey, 52% (46 respondents) indicated that a prompt response was their highest expectation and technical competence as their second choice. This first group of customers was united with a second group consisting of 46% (41 respondents) that indicated that technical competence was their primary concern followed by a quick response. One card was received that indicated that courtesy was their highest expectation and another card indicated cleanliness was their first expectation.